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Volunteerism in the Context of Environmental Non Governmental Organizations in Greece

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Abstract: The resolution of environmental problems and the minimization of environmental degradation is a major challenge. In this context, the role of civil society organizations is crucial in order to promote collaboration of several entities and also to enforce citizens' participation. The present article aims to explore volunteerism in the context of Greek Environmental Non Governmental Organizations (ENGOS). In particular, civil society in Greece is characterized as weak and with low levels of volunteerism compared to other European countries. However in the past years an increase of volunteerism has been observed indicating a shift in civil society organizations. In the present article the results of a survey will be presented aiming on volunteers from 16 NGOs functioning in Greece. Through the survey several issues are investigated, regarding the social characteristics of Greek volunteers, means of participation and motivation and sources of information. Through the results of the study it is observed that although there is an increase of participation in the past years, a lack of information aiming on citizens' motivation remains.

Keywords: Environmental Non Governmental Organizations (ENGOS), Civil Society, Volunteers, Greece

Introduction

NENGOS ARE REGARDED as entities functioning, in the context of civil society, independently from the state and they are the main area where citizens' participation may be developed. According to the World Bank, civil society is 'the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations'. The development of NGOs has lead to the creation of both national and international organizations (Desforges, 2004) with significant impact on public policies (e.g. Lane & Morrison, 2006; Moon & Park, 2004). However, their actions are not always independent from the state and significant discussion has been initiated concerning their accountability and the need of transparency mechanisms (Jepson, 2005).

Concerning their internal management and functioning, this is based both on volunteers and professionals. However, nowadays, several NGOs present a tendency of professionalizing, with highly skilled personnel. Under these circumstances the importance of volunteers is reduced and a gap on perceptions may occur between professionals and other members whose contribution is voluntary (Psimitis, 2008).

The present study focuses on volunteerism in environmental NGOs. Specifically, through an empirical study, perceptions of Greek volunteers from several environmental NGOs are

explored. As will be described below, Greece is regarded a country with significantly low levels of volunteerism (Jones et al., 2008). Thus, investigation of volunteers' perceptions along with their characteristics is regarded as important.

Civil Society and Volunteerism in Greece

An extensive literature analyzes the situation of civil society and NGOs in Greece and several authors have emphasized its weak character (Mouzelis, 1987, 1995a, 1995b; Close, 1999; Botetzagias 2000; Jones et al., 2008). Several reasons have been presented explaining the low level of participation of Greek citizens in non-governmental organizations. The most common justification is the development of social and political characteristics of Greece since the creation of the Modern Greek state obstructing the inclusion of citizens in public policy processes (see Mouzelis, 1995b; Mouzelis, 1987; Tsoukalas, 1987; Sotiropoulos, 1995). Other reasons are the highly interventionist state (Tsoukalas, 1987) and the strong role of political parties (Sotiropoulos, 1995). Thus, a low level of civic participation along with a low level of trust towards institutions is observed (Jones et al., 2008). Despite the above issues an increase of citizens' participation has been observed in the past years (Sotiropoulos, 2004). This increase is evident from the creation of new NGOs (Mouzelis & Pagoulatos, 2003; Sotiropoulos, 1995). However, this change may be attributed both to initiatives by the state promoting the functioning of non state institutions along with the weakening role of political parties (Sotiropoulos, 2004). Indicative examples of this increase is the activation of citizens during the Athens earthquake of 1999 in order to assist fellow citizens in need and also the occurrence of demonstrations and environmental protests due to the fires of 2007 in Greece (Karamichas, 2007).

Concerning Greek Environmental NGOs their role has increased in the decision-making processes of environmental policies. Through recent legislations, NGOs have been officially included to the management of protected areas in Greece. However, further improvements are necessary in order a substantial collaboration of all actors to be achieved. Furthermore, ENGOS may be regarded as an important source of pressure towards the state in order to implement environmental policies. Despite their positive role, NGOs have been criticized for not creating strong bonds with local communities in order to promote environmental policy implementation.

In this context, it is regarded as important to investigate the characteristics of citizens who participate in voluntary actions in Greek NGOs. The aim of the empirical study was to investigate the profile of Greek volunteers in ENGOS and explore their motives and means of participation as well the sources of information for participating in relevant actions. Through this investigation possible gaps may be identified in order to indicate means of improvement.

Methodology

The empirical survey was conducted during autumn of 2004 through the distribution of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was initially created and tested in a small non-random sample of volunteers. After the completion of this pre-survey a final questionnaire was created and distributed to volunteers from 16 NGOs. Due to the lack of a sampling framework, including all volunteers, the total sample was selected through the electronic mailing list

available through some NGOs in combination with a snowballing technique. The response rate was 65% percent and the final sample included 75 individuals.

The questionnaire was divided in four main parts. In the first section, the social characteristics of individuals were collected concerning gender, age, income and educational level. In the second part, means through which volunteers have participated in NGOs' actions were explored along with motives leading to their participation. In the third part, the flow of information for voluntary actions was explored concerning sources of information and also perceptions of volunteers regarding the appropriateness of this information. Finally, perceptions regarding the aim of NGOs were also investigated.

Results

Social Characteristics

As observed from Table 1, the majority of volunteers participating in the survey were female (69.3%). The average age of volunteers was 26.2 and the majority of respondents were included in the second and third income category (26.7% up to 11,999 euro and 22.7%, up to 17,999 euro respectively) (Table 1). Concerning education, it is observed that the sample has a high level of education with the majority of individuals having completed higher education or currently studying in Higher Education Institutions.

Table 1: Social Characteristics

Social Characteristic	%
GENDER	
Male	30.7
Female	69.3
EDUCATION	
Secondary education	10.7
Higher education	61.3
Further education	26.7
INCOME (Family)	
<6,000	13.3
6,000-11,999	26.7
12,000-17,999	22.7
18,000-23,999	10.7
24,000-35,999	14.7
36,000-47,999	6.7
48,000- 60,000	6.7
>60,000	1.3

OCCUPATION	
Student	30.7
Private sector	34.7
Civil servant	12.0
Unemployed	10.7
Freelance work	8.0
Other	4.0
AGE	26.2 (Mean)

Participation and Motivation

Most respondents in the study have participated more than once in a voluntary program of an environmental organization (once: 22.7%, twice: 14.7%, three times: 38.7%, over three times: 24%). Furthermore, 99% of the sample declared that they are willing to participate again in such actions.

Regarding means of participation, it is important to notice that a large percentage of respondents do not contribute through financial means in ENGOs (45.3%) while 28% declared that contributes financially to one ENGO and 16% contributes to more than one. Thus, volunteerism is not necessarily accompanied by financial contribution. It is also important to mention that financial contribution is positively correlated with income level ($r=0.29$, $p<0.05$) revealing that citizens with higher income present a higher tendency of contributing money. In addition, correlations indicate that the frequency of participating in voluntary actions is also connected with financial contribution ($r=0.26$, $p<0.05$). Consequently, volunteers with a higher frequency of participation also have a higher tendency of contributing money to NGOs.

Concerning the purpose of volunteerism this was investigated through a multiple response question. A large percentage (77.8%) declared that environmental awareness is the main mean of contribution while 25% declared that through such actions environmental benefits may be increased (Table 2). In addition, 36.1% recognized the importance of volunteerism as a form of free labor and 12.5% indicated that volunteerism covers state deficiencies.

Table 2: Means of Contribution

	N	Percent of Cases
Awareness	56	77.8%
State deficiencies	9	12.5%
Environmental benefits	18	25.0%
Free labor	26	36.1%
Other	16	22.2%

Another question in the survey investigated motives leading to voluntary participation of respondents. The most common motivation is interest for the environment which was mentioned by 40.1% of the sample. The second most important reason is travelling and socializing (28.5%). The third reason is personal satisfaction (17.5%) followed by creational and low budget vacations (8%). No significant differences are observed between social characteristics and motivations of volunteers.

Sources of Information

In a different part of the questionnaire, information concerning voluntary actions was explored. A first issue observed from the results of the study was that the majority of respondents regard information for environmental voluntary programs as inadequate (70.7%) and that it should be increased.

Concerning sources of information, it is observed that the most important source is the media (36%) and also informal networks of friends and family (36%). Furthermore, 12% of the respondents declared educational actors such as secondary and higher education institutions. Finally, only 6.7% declared internet sources revealing the low level of internet use at the time the research was conducted. By conducting a chi-square test, statistically significant differences are observed between female and male respondents concerning their sources of information ($p < 0.05$). In particular, media and informal networks of family and friends were selected by almost half of the female population (41.2% and 45.1% respectively) with the percentages for the male population being 26.1% and 13% respectively. On the other hand, information from education institutions was selected mostly by male respondents (Table 3).

Table 3: Sources of Information and Gender Differences

	Source of Information %			
	Media	Informal Networks	Internet	Education
Male	26.1	13.0	8.7	30.4
Female	41.2	45.1	5.9	3.9
Total	36.0	36.0	6.7	12.0

Perceptions for NGOs

A final set of questions in the survey aimed to explore perceptions of volunteers for ENGOs in Greece and possible improvements. According to the results of the study a main goal of ENGOs is the increase of environmental awareness and environmental protection which were mentioned by 68.6% and 50% of the sample respectively. A third goal was the promotion of team spirit and the creation of opportunities for citizens in order to participate in voluntary actions. Other goals mentioned during the survey were environmental education initiatives, improvement of networks and connections with local populations and promotion of environmentally responsible behavior.

Concerning human resources management, 70.7% of respondents ‘totally agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that it is adequate in Greek ENGOs. The main reasons for not having a positive at-

titude on this matter is that there are inadequate facilities and means in order to accomplish relevant targets, non-qualified personnel and lack of networking between volunteers.

Finally, an investigation concerning means through which volunteerism could be increased was conducted. The highest percentage (54.6%) was presented on transmission of information through the media which is also the main source of information for most respondents. Furthermore, information through schools and universities (46.8%) was also mentioned and 7.6% of the sample declared that an increase from the state budget should be provided. This latter indication reveals the strong role of the state in such initiatives according to citizens' perceptions.

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study aimed to investigate the characteristics of Greek volunteers along with their perceptions on issues connected to volunteerism. Through the results of the empirical survey several issues may be underlined. Regarding social characteristics of volunteers it is observed that there is a higher tendency of participation from female individuals. Furthermore, the majority of volunteers have a high level of education and also are of young age. These results can be explained from the fact that university studies provide individuals with additional information concerning environmental issues and also that students have more available leisure time.

Another important finding of the study is the fact that volunteerism is not necessarily connected with financial contribution. This result may be linked with the professionalization of NGOs analyzed in the theoretical part of the paper. In particular, citizens who only contribute financially are not directly involved in decision-making processes of NGOs. Thus, individuals who seek active participation in the resolution of environmental problems prefer voluntary contribution than financial.

Furthermore, through the study it is evident that the values of volunteerism have not been appropriately promoted in Greece. Specifically, through individuals' perceptions it is observed that volunteerism is also regarded as a result of state deficiencies. In addition, regarding benefits deriving from voluntary actions a combination of social and environmental benefits have also been presented to previous studies (Haigh, 2006; Martinez & McMullin, 2004). However, in the present study the majority of motives mentioned by respondents connect volunteerism with personal benefits, such as socializing and personal satisfaction.

Regarding the flow of information this is relatively weak and is mainly conducted through the media, educational institutions and informal networks of friends and family. Reference to informal networks could be explained in the context of the general characteristics of Greek society where family ties are of high importance (Jones et al., 2008). However, the lack of information deriving directly from NGOs (e.g. seminars, conferences) is important.

Concluding, the study identified several areas of improvement in order to increase volunteerism in Greece. A first step is the increase of information, both through formal and informal networks, and also through NGOs. In this context, information and networking between volunteers should also be promoted. Furthermore, this information should promote the values of volunteerism along with the multiple benefits accompanying voluntary participation in relevant activities. Finally, information should also be directed to older groups of individuals providing multiple motivations in order to increase their participation in voluntary programs. Through such improvements environmental awareness and participation of citizens in the

implementation of environmental policies may be increased influencing also the importance of NGOs in environmental policy decision-making.

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